The private problem with public service: rural teachers in educational markets

Staffing rural and remote schools is an important policy issue for the public good. This paper examines the private issues it also poses for teachers with families working in these communities, as they seek to reconcile careers with educational choices for children. The paper first considers historical responses to staffing rural and remote schools in Australia, and the emergence of neoliberal policy encouraging marketisation of the education sector. We report on interviews about considerations motivating household mobility with eleven teachers across regional, rural and remote communities in Queensland. Like other middle class parents, these teachers prioritised their children's educational opportunities over career opportunities. The analysis demonstrates how teachers in rural and remote communities constitute a special group of educational consumers with insider knowledge and unique dilemmas around school choice. Their heightened anxieties around school choice under neoliberal policy are shown to contribute to the public issue of staffing rural and remote schools.

Keywords: dilemma; middle class; neoliberalism; parents; rural staffing; school choice; teachers

Introduction

Attracting and retaining qualified teachers to staff schools in regional, rural and remote communities is an important policy issue of ongoing concern in both richer and poorer countries. This paper demonstrates how it also presents a complex private issue for teachers with families in such communities as they seek to reconcile their own careers with their children's education. We show how private decisions can contribute to the broader public issue of staffing schools in these communities, and suggest how neoliberal policies might exacerbate the problem. Our analysis thus demonstrates an unintended link between the micro and macro consequences of marketisation policy.

Following Baum *et al.* (2005), the term 'regional' refers to towns with more than 10,000 residents that act as service hubs outside metropolitan centres; 'rural' refers to

townships supporting a predominantly agricultural district; and 'remote' refers to communities at a significant distance from other population centres. These categories are relational, connoting interwoven senses of spatiality, economic underpinnings, and low population density such that their services contrast with the 'metro-centric' assumptions (Green and Letts 2007) of much policy. Our study is situated in Australia, with 68.8% of the population in major cities, and only 2.2% in remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). While Australia has a land area similar to the US, it has only 7 % of the US population, and a population density of three people per square kilometre compared to 34 in the US and 257 in the UK (World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.POP.DNST, accessed 11 April 2013). Nevertheless, all communities however small and dispersed require schools.

Historically, state jurisdictions established secular government or 'public' schools across Australia. In addition, Catholic parishes established a parallel system of low fee Catholic schools. Larger population centres also host high fee, high status independent or 'private' Protestant and Catholic schools. More recently, another more moderately priced tier of secular and religious independent schools has emerged in suburban areas. In metropolitan areas and regional centres, these layers have produced a variegated market of school choice with the capacity to differentiate and specialise offerings, fanning a middle class drift away from the public sector (Campbell *et al.* 2009). Musset's (2012) survey of school choice statistics in OECD countries identified the markedly high availability of school choice in Australia, and the relatively low proportion of students choosing public schools compared to other nations. However, these statistical aggregations only reflect the circumstances for the urban majority. In rural and remote areas it is a different story. The government school, with perhaps a small Catholic primary school, typically services a small population base that limits differentiation or specialisation (Author 2 *et al*., 2013). Australian teachers are required to be

formally qualified with remuneration regulated by industrial awards. Recruiting and retaining such professionals in rural and remote schools has posed an ongoing problem.

Over time, educational systems across Australia have used preparation and employment strategies to supply qualified teachers to rural and remote schools. A pupil-teacher system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries allowed rural students to become qualified teachers without relocating. However, with the expansion of teacher preparation in centralised colleges, rural staffing became more problematic. In New South Wales, the Minister of Public Instruction in the early twentieth century worried that the single training college in Sydney 'encouraged a drift to the city of talented country students' (Turney and Taylor 1996, p. 21). In Victoria, there were similar concerns that the Melbourne city location for the Teachers' College discouraged new teachers from seeking country postings (Author 3 1998). Consequently, these two state governments opened a number of regional teachers' colleges between 1926 and 1951 (Turney and Taylor 1996, Author 3 1998). In Queensland, however, a single teachers' college opened in 1914 in Brisbane to serve the entire state. Similar to other states, students received a scholarship allowance (£1 per week in 1919/1920) provided they later taught in a school nominated by the Education Department for a specific period of time (Hyams 1979). This 'bond' effectively staffed rural and remote schools with new graduates. In February 1972, the Commonwealth's Senate Standing Committee on Education, Science and the Arts recommended the abolition of scholarships and bonding. Most Teachers' Colleges became Colleges of Advanced Education by 1973, and scholarships with bonds were phased out.

Another preparation strategy was to instil a sense of public service duty. As Arthur Ward, a former Ballarat Teachers' College student, reflecting upon the 1926-31 period, recalled:

> At the college, the staff had aimed at inculcating certain attitudes and ideals of service; ideals we were to carry into the big, wide educational world, and to apply them with patience and dedication in all our work with children, and in our service to the community as a whole (Author 3 1999, p. 19).

According to Ward even the college song 'helped to instil … ideals of service' (Author 3 1999, p. 24) in the trainee teachers.

Regarding employment strategies, Australia's colonial governments before Federation abandoned local control of staffing in schools and appointed government classifiers to oversee teacher appointments and promotion from a common roll. One's professional classification was notionally related to years of service; however, accepting less 'desirable' rural appointments enabled ambitious teachers to gain more rapid promotion (Author 3 1999). Applicants for permanent teaching positions with state/territory departments are still encouraged to teach in regional, rural and remote areas through various incentives such as financial allowances rewarding country service and promotion opportunities.

Though attracting qualified teachers to rural/remote posts has been equally problematic in many other national settings, only a limited number of possible solutions have emerged. Ladd's (2007) scan of policy levers to ensure the supply of a qualified teacher workforce across developed countries considered differentiated salaries to attract staff to disadvantaged inner city schools in centres such as London, and incentives to retain teachers in rural areas. Ladd notes 'both types of shortages emerge in most developed countries' (p.204). Ladd reports a greater reliance on unqualified teachers to address rural shortfalls in countries such as the US and Sweden where the teaching profession receives relatively lower salaries. Voigt-Graff (2003) and Zhou and Shang (2011) report the same fallback solution of using unqualified teachers in Fiji and rural China respectively. Incentive schemes for hard-to-staff locations are also common policy strategies, for example in Fiji (Voigt-Graf 2003), some countries in Africa (Mulkeen 2010), and some states in the US (Jimerson 2003). Other

systems such as Mozambique and Malawai use centralised deployment (Mulkeen 2010). In China, the Free Teacher Education Program sought teachers for disadvantaged rural districts through a combination of financial incentives, high status university affiliations and a two-year bond (Wang and Gao 2013). Though from such diverse settings, these studies also consistently report teachers' efforts to circumvent forced rural placements, which suggests that systemic solutions do not resolve the tension between private aspirations and public good.

Centralised deployment and forced transfers still play a role within Australia. The Queensland Department of Education website is very explicit about teachers' 'country service' obligations:

> It is a condition of permanent employment with the department that teachers may be required to work anywhere in Queensland to meet statewide staffing requirements. Permanent teachers should expect that they will be required to teach in locations across Queensland, as all teachers are likely to be required to transfer at some stage. (Queensland Government Department of Education, Training and Employment 2012)

Other states and territories are less explicit. For example, the Northern Territory, with 40% of its schools in remote locations, promotes their Remote Teaching Service to 'committed and highly skilled teachers with specific attributes' (Northern Territory Government of Australia 2010).

More recently, there has been a bilateral push to reinvent local control of staffing in Australia. In early 2012, the Federal Government's *Empowering Local Schools* National Partnerships initiative sought to reinvent local control of school decision-making in Australia, including a focus on greater 'hiring and firing' autonomy. Phase 1 of the initiative from 2012-2014 granted greater autonomy in workforce decisions to approximately one thousand government, independent, and Catholic schools (Australian Government 2013; Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2011), with

one third of these trial schools in regional areas. Although widely supported, principal associations and teachers' unions feared such an initiative would further disadvantage rural and remote schools if the centralised transfer system was dismantled (Patty 2010, Tapim 2011). For example, the New South Wales Teachers Federation recommendation was resolute from the outset: "Do not participate in the Empowering Local Schools (ELS) national partnership initiative" (Zadkovich 2014, para. 1). One major concern was the use of temporary contracts, thereby reducing secure, permanent staffing through the state-wide transfer systems (Zadkovich 2014). Phase 2 of the initiative will not proceed and the program is due to conclude in June 2014 (Australian Government 2013).

With a change of Federal Government in 2013, a new policy was announced committing funding to the *Independent Public Schools* initiative, with the target of 25% of government schools becoming independent public schools by 2017 (Australian Government Department of Education 2014). As with the *Empowering Local Schools* initiative, schools will be funded to be more autonomous in workforce decisions; however, the new initiative will not fund non-government independent or Catholic schools. The Western Australian state government had already implemented an independent public schools initiative in 2010 (Western Australia Department of Education 2014). Despite the current interest, a recent review found "little evidence that the development of Independent Public Schools will benefit school students" warning the process "reinforces inequality and social disadvantage" (Fitzgerald & Rainnie, 2011, p. 2).

Rural teachers, families and mobility

Much research about teachers in rural/remote schools has focused on recruiting and retaining beginning teachers. This focus highlights factors such as pre-service rural/remote

experiences, incentives, mentorships, lifestyle, cultural values, infrastructure, employment conditions, and the pull of urban and coastal positions (Yarrow *et al.* 1999, Lock 2008). However, there is little in terms of teachers' career trajectories over time and space, or of their work/family interface, despite the fact that the Australian teaching workforce is highly feminised (Brennan 2009) reflecting gender ratios reported elsewhere (OECD 2012). The feminisation of the profession has been linked to gender stereotypes, the nature of teachers' work (Acker 1995-1996) and the trade-off between wages and status for family-friendly work conditions (Blackmore 2005). Teaching emerges as a choice of profession that can accommodate the demands of family life in its work conditions (Dolton and Makepeace 1993). However there has been little attention given to work/family interaction beyond choice of profession.

The limited studies of teachers with families cite family reasons, such as spouse employment and children's education opportunities, as disincentives for taking up rural positions or motivations for leaving such positions (Boylan *et al.* 1993, Roberts 2004), with no further probing. In contrast, Forsey (2010) offers a qualitative account of two teachers working in metropolitan Western Australia. Under the phrase, 'publicly minded, privately focused' (p. 58), Forsey (2010) captures the contradictions for teachers caught between 'communitarian ideals' (p. 54) and ethical commitment to public education on one hand, and their choice of the independent or Catholic sector for their career or children. We suggest this contradiction illuminates teachers' career mobility.

The portability of teaching credentials strongly influences teachers' career choice (Department of Education Science and Training 2006), but an interview study with pre-service teachers (Author 2 *et al.* 2010) suggests country service now competes against more exotic destinations for new graduates. Rural recruitment incentives such as the accumulation of transfer 'points' frame a rural/remote school position as temporary (Reid *et al.* 2010).

While these incentives can attract teachers to rural/remote locations, they institutionalise the motivation to move on. Reid *et al.* (2010) argue that many teachers consider rural/remote schools undesirable. A large national survey in 2010 (McKenzie *et al.* 2011) confirmed the widespread pattern of teachers spending three years or less in their first non-metropolitan school.

Mills and Gale (2003) argue that turnover in rural areas produces systemic inequities. Their interview study with 23 teachers, parents and students in an Australian rural town concluded that teachers' typical transience communicates a 'temporary or fleeting' commitment to local families (p. 147). Pini, Price, and McDonald's (2010) interview study of 13 teachers and managers in 10 Australian rural schools identified a pejorative discourse about the rural working class in contrast to the rural and urban middle class. These studies suggest that, despite systemic incentives, constructions of rurality erode teachers' career investment in rural/remote communities. This literature has not considered the relationship between retention and teachers' strategies for their own children's education.

Adding neoliberalism to the picture

The provision of public schools and registered teachers once was sufficient to attract middle class professionals to less populated areas (Wells *et al.* 2005). Since the 1980s, however, the global ascendancy of neoliberalism as metapolicy (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) has legitimated and encouraged the exercise of consumer choice and marketisation to improve public sector efficiency (Wells and Crain 2000, Pusey 2003). This school of economic theory advocated:

> an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices ... to guarantee ... the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental planning) then they must be created, by state action if

> necessary. (Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

Harvey argues that this ideology and its pragmatic implementation achieved a 'dramatic consolidation of neoliberalism as a new economic orthodoxy' (p.22) and hegemonic 'commonsense' (p.3) across advanced national economies. Neoliberalism has thus re-engineered the state's role to become a curator of markets. It also demands new market-oriented subjectivities of citizens, with an 'increased burden of responsibility for self-actualization, self-fulfilment and self-securitization … (to) live a life of freedom through responsibility and choice' (King and Kendall 2004, pp. 209-210).

In rural areas, neoliberal economic restructuring has manifested in more exposure to global competition, and a gradual withdrawal of subsidised services. This marks a profound change in the economic and social footing of these communities:

> Regional towns were, to a limited extent, 'planned' by Federal and State Governments which supported railways, roads, schools, law courts, police stations and other facilities and services. Such state involvement was consistent with ideologies of decentralisation, state-assisted economic growth and egalitarianism. Commitment to such ideals has now been replaced by a more narrow focus on free markets, 'user pays' and 'self help' - as part of what is known as neoliberalism. (Gray and Lawrence 2001, p.9).

In practice however, non-urban communities across Australia's thinly populated regions have limited capacity to attract market investment while their public community services have become stretched under such one-size-fits-all policy (Tonts *et al.* 2007).

In the education sector, neoliberal policy has informed the Commonwealth Government's *My School* website (http://www.myschool.edu.au/) which profiles every Australian school to inform parents' choices. School quality is thus converted to a matter of private judgement and choice for parents, rather than a systemic undertaking to assure equitable service. Advocates for greater school choice argue that market mechanisms in the education sector will curtail

inefficiencies, promote individual liberty, and make systems more equitable, despite mounting evidence of growing market segregation by race, ability and class (Musset 2012). Under such logic, the 'good parent-citizen' (Campbell *et al.* 2009, p. 4) is encouraged to distrust public sector provision and to look beyond the local school.

Campbell *et al.*'s (2009) Australian study ide1ntified two sides to the choice disposition: 'aspiration and anxiety' (p. 3). In the UK, Ball (2003) and others have similarly documented how and why the anxious middle classes in particular invest in prudential educational choice. Following Ball (2003), class here is no longer understood through solidarities and economic relations, but rather draws a relational distinction between consumption patterns, lifestyles, trajectories, investments and practices. The choice of non-public schooling serves as a very visible indicator of middle class identity in these ways.

Further, the intrusion of neoliberal policy into the education sector has displaced previous policy priorities around social justice and equity:

> The values and incentives of market policies being pursued and celebrated by the states of almost all Western societies give legitimation and impetus to certain actions and commitments - enterprise, competition, excellence - and inhibit and delegitimize others - social justice, equity, tolerance. (Ball, 2003, p.179)

This ideological shift invokes a fictional 'level playing field' which erases the very real difference between geographical markets, and the variable resources of parents and communities to play the market.

Our concern here is that this policy zeitgeist may produce unintended effects that exacerbate the problem of teachers' rural tenure. Firstly, teachers are themselves middle class professionals likely to be engaged in educational markets as anxious parent-choosers. This

positions teachers with children in a unique bind as both service providers and service choosers. Secondly, educational markets in smaller communities will offer more limited choice which may not satisfy the escalating aspirations of middle class parents. In a nutshell, teachers as skilled professionals are needed for rural/remote areas. However, while they provide the public solution for such localities, these same localities can present private problems for the teacher with family responsibilities.

To understand this public/private dilemma, we draw on Honig's concept of dilemmatic space, as interpreted by Fransson and Grannas (2013). Rather than depicting dilemmas as atypical situations confronting the individual with an internal conflict of values, the concept of dilemmatic space refers to 'social constructions resulting from structural conditions and relational aspects in everyday practices . . . how dilemmas emerge in a space between individuals and the context in which they find themselves' (p. 7). In this way dilemmas are not aberrant, singular events, but rather 'ever-present spaces' (p. 14) in which identities and relations must be negotiated, creating tensions and dilemmas on both individual and social levels. This concept allows us to consider whether the rural/remote community creates a different sort of relational space for professionals whereby their public and private concerns cannot be held apart as they would be in deeper markets.

Methodology

This paper explores public/private tensions through an interview study conducted with 11 teachers with school-aged children, working in six communities along a spatial transect from a regional centre to a remote town over 900 kilometres inland, while still within the same state jurisdiction. Each semi-structured interview captured a chronology of household formation, moves, educational choices and career progression with narrative accounts of the

considerations behind decisions to stay or to move. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed with pseudonyms for people, places and institutions.

The largest town (#1) offered a rich array of independent, Catholic and government schools within commuting distance. The other towns typically offered Catholic alternatives to government primary and secondary schools. In the two most remote locations (#5 and #6), there was a minimal market offering a choice of a Catholic primary school as a low fee alternative to the government school. In the most remote community (#6), the only (government) secondary schooling stopped at Year 10. This transect across increasing remoteness with decreasing educational choice offered a variety of conditions in which to explore teacher/parents' reasoning through their public/private tensions.

With the teacher union's assistance, teachers with school-aged children in the six communities received an invitation to participate. Volunteers were working in both government and Catholic sectors. The sample included nine females and two males, with two single parents and two participants in blended families including children from previous relationships. Table 1 offers an overview of the 11 participants, family size, their location and tenure in this location, the sector they work in, and the sectors in which they chose to educate their children.

(Table 1)

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted, firstly coding according to top-down topics derived from the informing theory and literature review (*school choice, mobility, sector preference*). Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between the 'prevalence' and 'key-ness' of themes, the former being a claim of frequency to validate interpretive claims, the latter reflecting 'whether it captures something important in relation to the overall

research questions' (p. 82). Using the latter criterion, data selections were made where mobility, educational choice and/or career as topical codes intersected. A second layer of bottom-up coding within these selections typified the underlying logic in the excerpt (for example, *dilemma, prioritising, insider knowledge*).

Findings

In the narratives, moving into rural/remote communities could solve one set of problems while creating new ones within the family unit. The analysis is reported in two stages; firstly the push/pull factors driving teachers' mobility through rural/remote communities, then the public/private dilemmas teachers reported between their roles as service provider and service chooser.

Rural and remote service in career trajectories

Many of the participants described being highly mobile as young teachers without family responsibilities, open to rural/remote postings in order to get a professional start. For example, Wendy (Town #6) described her mindset as a young, single teacher:

> I came to [remote town] in 1985… Much to my mother's horror… I thought it was a bit of an adventure. Yeah, I'll go out and have a look, see what it's like … and Mum's going, 'Of course, you're not going out there'. I said, 'Well, of course, I am going out there. I've got a job'.

In contrast, a rural posting was more problematic for Helen (Town #4), a mature-age graduate with three children. She told of receiving a letter from her employer notifying her of a posting to a rural town:

> The letter came and I said to my whole family, 'What do you want? Do we move? Do we stay?' It's not a bad time for [Child 1], because it was Years 10, 11 and 12 and … I said to them straight up, 'I will go and that's great, but at Grade 12, I need to bring her back,

> back to a place where it's more her comfort zone and there's more opportunity for her'…. Even if I don't get a transfer [back to city], we're probably going to go anyhow.

This job prospect had to be filtered through priorities for other family members. While the rural move solved the employer's expectation of country service, the family approached it as temporary, planning to relocate to the city in pursuit of 'more opportunity' for children, with or without the department's help.

Once teachers started a family, priorities typically shifted and career opportunities had to align with educational opportunities, services, or proximity to extended family. Where these needs were met, families in rural/remote locations were more likely to stay; where these needs were not met, families were keen to move on. As an example, Anna and her teacher husband (Town #1) reported a mobile early career phase working in a number of remote and rural locations. Having fulfilled country service obligations in their minds, they purposefully moved to the large regional centre to start a family with that town's educational market and opportunities in mind:

> We specifically moved because we wanted to raise a family, or start a family and we believed that schools were very good here, we'd heard good things about them. … I wanted access to educational opportunities in [the city], the museum, the art gallery and things like that.

Anna chose high fee, single sex private schools for her children, while she and her husband continued to work in the public school sector.

For another participant, tenure in the rural town met the needs of the family more than the career trajectory. Alex (Town #2) had hoped to move 'back' to a regional centre where they owned a home and he had promotional opportunities; however, he was reluctant to move while his wife and three children were thriving in their current location:

> With my wife, she's on her way … We don't think there would be the opportunities for her back in [regional centre] that there are here so she'd be starting from scratch there. … We're really pleased with the second child, but first child also,. ... Grade 6 she sort of struggled, [Grade] 7, now in Grade 8, she got an academic award … so in those three years she's had a massive turnaround. We think we don't really want to upset her in moving now because she's cruising on very nicely. (Alex)

The common element between Alex's differently resolved narrative and the others is the primacy given to family considerations over career in mobility decisions.

Three female participants described how they met and married husbands while posted in remote localities, transforming their country service stint into long term residency. For Wendy (Town #6), this lifestyle eventually entailed sending her children to metropolitan boarding schools for high schooling from Year 7, though the local school continued to Year 10. This choice was considered necessary despite great financial and emotional cost.

Like Wendy, Nancy (Town #5) had also relished an early phase working in rural and remote communities then married a partner from a local cattle station, settling in his remote town to raise a family. However, with her elder child approaching high schooling, Nancy told of feeling less certain about where the family should live. If staying, they were considering the local high school for the first years, then a metropolitan boarding school for the later years. However, she was uncomfortable with this plan and the local alternative whereby mothers relocate to a larger centre with their children for high schooling:

> I'm starting to get itchy feet … I think mainly because of the kids. I can see more opportunities for them in a bigger centre but I'm not prepared to move half of my family educationally until [husband] is ready to make that same commitment ... I'd like better opportunities for my kids and to get those better opportunities in that environment, that's a lot more financial load for a family.

Nancy's misgivings and unresolved narrative speak to the anxiety provoked between her aspirations for her children and the limited local market.

Another participant, Suzanna (Town #1), had also married locally while on a remote posting, then lived on an isolated property. She had been looking forward to sending her children to the small government school in their district, and the couple had started saving towards the cost of boarding school for their secondary education. When the marriage failed, she moved with her children to the regional centre closer to her extended family. The remote locality thus lost the chance of a long-term professional to anchor the local school. These three narratives tell of female teachers prepared to pursue careers in remote schools, but not prepared to educate their children in the same schools, as evident in their plans to transcend the local market in search of 'better opportunities'.

Such narratives of long-term retention were outnumbered by those who viewed remote or rural locations as a necessary, temporary tour of duty. In these accounts, the magnetic pull back to larger centres or cities was explicitly linked to family priorities. For example, Imogen (Town #4) considered country service part of her professional duty. However, she told of an ongoing struggle balancing this with opportunities to achieve permanency in her specialisation, and with health care for her family:

> I knew that it was part of my teacher responsibilities that we had to do the out west thing. … When an expression of interest came up in [rural town 1] for six months I was like yes, pick me, please pick me. … because I was just getting really disgruntled with [remote town] services. My children were very sick in the first year… We could never get into a doctor, like three week waiting list ... So we picked up the whole family and went to [rural town 1]. … and then by November I think we had found out that I had won the position in [rural town 2] and I didn't want to come to be quite honest because of [husband]'s health. … but [husband] said, 'Well we need to have permanency …'. I'd be looking at moving probably at the end of the year if I could so that [Child 1] could go to a different school. Not just for his education, but so that I can be closer to my mother.

This narrative involved considerations of health services, professional responsibility, permanency, promotion, family ties and school choice, and how combinations thereof tipped

the balance at different points. All these factors pressed simultaneously on the family, jostling for priority.

A similar but differently resolved narrative was told by Michael (Town #1). One of his children was born with serious health problems. This family consideration trumped career advancement:

> I just can't really commit to being in any management or promotion positions. ... if anything my intention was at some point to travel, go back out west. ... It was when my second born was born with the health problems we changed our tune.

Michael had once imagined moving up the career ladder across a series of rural postings, and the idea still attracted him:

> I still contemplate taking a job out west to seek a promotion to be honest, … deep down, that's what I would have liked to have done. … Logistically I don't. My wife has said to me 'That's fine. You can do that but I'm not coming with you'.

Rather, he told of relinquishing a promotional position to better balance family demands, then seeking employment at a particular school in a regional centre that would best suit his child's needs, intending to be part of that community as both parent and teacher.

By these accounts, rural and remote teaching positions are viewed as valuable but temporary options to gain permanency or career advancement, thus reinforcing rural workforce turnover. Beyond the rarer choice of boarding school, these narratives highlight the role family priorities play in determining career location, that is, how teacher-as-parent trumps teacher-as-professional, drawing the professional back to markets offering 'more opportunity'.

Reconciling Public/Private Dilemmas in Rural Teacher Tenure

Teachers in rural and remote towns described unique dilemmas as a result of living and

working in a location with limited choice in its educational market. One dilemma stemmed from teachers' ideological commitment to a particular schooling sector (government/ Catholic/ independent) in principle and their private choices when it came to their children's education. A second dilemma stemmed from their insider knowledge about schools or sectors and its interaction with their professed stance. A third dilemma concerned doubts whether their children should attend the school where they work.

Sector preference versus school choice

The teachers, like other parents, expressed generic judgments about particular educational sectors that informed their systemic preferences. However, they also described how their children's particular needs could precipitate a choice that went against this ideological grain. As one such example, Olivia (Town #5), a single parent working in a remote government school, had a strong preference for government education for her daughter's secondary education. She then weighed this preference against operational knowledge about the government and Catholic high schools in her town:

> At the end of last term, the arts teacher at the [government] high school has gone … So they currently don't actually have a dedicated arts teacher and this is where I start going, 'Okay... That's really important to her and also very important to me'. … It's something that when I heard that, I was like, 'Oh, okay. I have to rethink this'. …

Yvonne (Town #6) also expressed a strong allegiance to the government sector as both parent and professional. When Yvonne's eldest child was ready to start pre-school, they were living in a rural town and there was only one choice in her mind:

> [Child 1] went to … half day pre-school [attached to the government school]… I can't remember whether the Catholic school had a pre-school or not … that wouldn't have been an option for me, anyway … it's difficult to be working in one system and promoting it as the best and then sending your child up to another.

Her comment captures the visibility of teachers' private choices and their professional resonance in small communities. Yvonne quickly capitulated this stance when her daughter encountered problems in the remote town's government school:

> She [Child 1] was going to come here until Year 10. What happened there is … she was treated quite poorly … one day she came home and she said, 'I'm going away to boarding school'. I said, 'Okay. Off you go'. … In [previous rural town], a number of families send their girls to [independent boarding school], so I had heard about it from the teachers … I knew they had a good cross country program, … But I also knew musically speaking, they had programs there, as well. … I knew that it would give her the opportunity to take part in that stuff, if she wanted it, but it would also, academically speaking, I knew she'd be right where she was. (Yvonne)

Like other middle class parents, Yvonne was alert to her child's academic aspirations, the peer group, and extra-curricular programs. Despite a professional loyalty to government education, Yvonne prioritised her daughter's wellbeing and happiness. Olivia's and Yvonne's narratives illustrate how the dilemma between professional systemic preferences and familial choices were resolved by prioritising children's interests.

Teachers' insider knowledge in school choice

In their decisions, Yvonne drew comfort from 'what I know about education', while Olivia's knowledge of staffing decisions in the local school prompted her to 'rethink'. Such narratives make evident how teachers as parents are differently resourced from other parents, given their insider knowledge, that is, their familiarity with a school's community and its practices gleaned from professional experience, to which other parents would not be privy. This inevitably coloured the local choices available to them as parents, producing a dilemma for some.

Insider knowledge precipitated Nancy's choice of primary school for her children. Despite being strong advocates of government schooling, they chose the Catholic primary

school for both children, not for religious reasons, but because of the social environment Nancy had observed:

> I was working at the state [government] school as well as [Catholic school]. I based my decision at the time on where he would go purely on the nature of the school... At the time I just felt that the state school couldn't offer the positive family environment that I wanted my kids to be in. So I chose [Catholic school] purely because ... it was a nice family school… I was 100 per cent sure my kids would go to a state school. I've always said that and it was very difficult for me to not send them to a state school because I was teaching … It's very difficult being a teacher in a small town of a state school and being seen to be sending your child to another school…

Working on contracts in both available schools equipped Nancy with intimate knowledge of the market. Her willingness to exercise choice casts her as the anxious middle class parent closely monitoring each child and exercising what choice she had. The dilemma for Nancy lay not in choosing what she felt was best for her child, but wearing her private choice professionally, 'being seen'.

In this way teachers-as-parents emerge as uniquely well-informed consumers in limited educational markets. In turn they also become conspicuous consumers. Being professionally accountable for one's private choices is a stress particular to teachers-as-parents, given their heightened visibility in small communities.

Working in one sector did not always result in a dilemma around school choice in another sector. For some, insider knowledge gained from working in a school/sector impelled them to find something different for their own children. Anna reported no professional conflict between her public sector employment, and choice of private schools: 'we knew we didn't want that for our children'. In contrast, Olivia's experiences in private schools informed her family preference for state schooling. These participants had insider knowledge at their disposal. Parents such as Nancy told of some ideological conflict but decisions again

prioritised the fit for children. Others, such as Anna, Suzanna and Olivia, reported no particular dilemma, using their insider knowledge to place their children in the most advantageous choice by their reckoning, as would other middle class parents.

Parents teaching at their children's school

A further dilemma described by some teachers in smaller towns was whether to enrol their children at the school where they worked. By their telling, these teacher-parents were prepared to avoid this for their children's sake. However, there were exceptions and the perceived dilemma typically dissipated with experience.

Gabrielle and her teacher husband (Town #2) were posted to their rural town initially for two years of country service that turned into seventeen years 'because we absolutely loved it'. As staunch supporters of public education, their choices were limited: 'We wouldn't have sent our kids to the Catholic school or to the private school'. Their dilemma arose when the children reached high school, with both parents teaching in the town's only government high school:

> What was an issue was, do we put our children through being at high school with both of us there?… do we put them through being there with us? So we did talk to [Child 1] about it and she was fine ... If she had been really affected by it, then we would have been prepared to move then for her and then leave town. …

Gabrielle and her husband passed the decision to their child, being prepared to move the whole family if necessary, ruling out any choice of the other schools in the same town as a possible solution.

When Helen's family moved to their rural town, there was a choice of the government primary school (where Helen was working) or the Catholic school for their children. The doubts she expressed are unique to teachers as parents.

> Well, at first, we thought we might send them to the private [Catholic] school, … they'd never been at the same school as me before. … and it was like, oh, I don't know. This is a bit scary, them being there. So when we moved here, I thought, no, I'll put them with me and we'll see how it goes. ... My first year, I was actually in his year level. … I made sure I said straight up, 'Please don't put him in my class'. … I wasn't sure how kids would react. Will they tease him? Will they pick on him? Will they bully him because he's my son?

Michael reported a different dilemma arising from parents and children being at the same school. Michael's second child had serious health issues and associated educational concerns. Prior to this child starting school, Michael applied to teach at the particular school he wanted his son to attend:

> In mind of having my son coming to school … I actually applied for this school … I said, 'Look I have done my country service, I've got this many points and I'm just playing my cards on this one school with the view of sending my son'. ... I thought that I would come here prior to him starting school, which is the only reason why I moved at that point. … I wanted to be here to establish relationships with the school community, get a good education for my kids and my son.

Michael reasoned that working in the school to establish good relationships with the school community would benefit his children's education. However this decision later produced tensions from being both teacher and parent in the school community:

> I wouldn't say I 'regret' (the decision), I'm glad that we've got him in this school. However that said, I do want to pursue I guess more meetings, you could say, to establish his program and I need to also do that in the role of a parent and because I'm in [government sector] myself and at the school he is at, just to do that as a parent I think has probably blurred the line a little bit.

Where Helen itemised the risks to the child when parent and child were at the same school, Michael reflected on the difficult 'blurred' space created where professional and parental roles coexisted.

The dilemmas these teachers reported were exacerbated by factors common to small towns: limited schooling choices; teachers' visibility in the community conflating their parent and professional roles; living and working with a known population; and being privy to insider knowledge. Decisions and actions by teacher-as-parent risked being associated with teacher-as-professional. Though still possible, such conflation of roles would be less likely in larger communities.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some of the private issues behind the public problem of teacher recruitment and retention in regional, rural and remote communities by probing the deliberative processes behind household relocations. We positioned this study firstly in a scan of historical interventions to recruit and retain qualified professionals in Australia's rural and remote schools, then the emergence of neoliberal metapolicy promoting school choice. We argue current policy has eroded confidence in public sector provision and in the capacity of the limited educational markets in smaller communities to satisfy middle class parents' desire for 'more subjects', 'more choice' and 'more opportunities'. The workforce problem and the impact of neoliberal policy will resonate in many other national systems.

The rural teachers we interviewed displayed similar anxieties and aspirations to those documented in the international literature regarding the middle class and educational markets. We extended the typical purview of school choice studies to demonstrate how their pursuit of choice typically pulled them to different towns, not just different schools. Factors such as school clientele, academic standards, extra-curricular opportunities and resourcing influenced parents' decision-making. These considerations are not unique to rural/ remote areas, but the differentiation cultivated in metropolitan markets highlights the limited offerings in rural/remote markets. More choice need not signify better quality, but private quests for

choice were shown to sustain the turnover of experienced teachers in rural/remote schools. This in turn feeds the perception of these schools' lesser quality.

The analysis also identified unique dilemmas that distinguished the rural teacher-as-parent as a conspicuous consumer. The visibility of their private choices could reflect on, or undermine, their sectoral allegiances as professionals. Ironically, placing the child in the school with the parent-teacher also created dilemmas.

While this empirical study was conducted in Australia's sparsely populated space, the general argument applies to rural workforce dynamics in other countries. Ascendant neoliberalism places the onus on individuals and families to manage both risks and opportunities in their decisions. Larger centres with deeper markets provide more choice and appear less risky and more opportune. The portability of a teacher's credentials means that the option to move somewhere else will always be there. In this way, a location does not exist in isolation from other places. Rather, it exists in a network of relations 'linking that place to places beyond' (Massey 1993, p. 68) in competitive tension producing reputational 'winners and losers' (Harvey 1993, p. 7).

By these accounts, the profession upholds a sense of duty to service rural and remote communities. However, their other life roles as parents embroiled in educational markets soon impinged on where, when and how they were willing to engage with rural career opportunities. Career moves outside urban or large regional centres were typically scheduled before children reached school-age, or pursued on condition of it suiting children's schooling. The historical scan in the introduction showed how staffing rural/remote schools has long been an issue. Various solutions have been attempted in both the preparation and employment of teachers. The literature around rural teachers' tenure also suggested that the public sector's imposition of country service and systemic incentives in transfer points inadvertently reflect badly on the communities they seek to help. By highlighting the logic of neoliberalism, we

expect that such past collectivist strategies would have even less success today. Meanwhile, new experiments reinventing local staffing arrangements are yet to produce solutions. We now sketch two possible ways forward – one exploiting the neoliberal frame, the other looking beyond it.

A hypothetical solution constructed within a neoliberal frame would be to stimulate and variegate the educational market in rural and remote towns. This might be achieved by developing a tier of independent or religious schools, perhaps in partnership or franchise arrangements with such schools in metropolitan centres to badge the enterprise and capitalise on reputation and networks. However, market logic would suggest that such a tier would have emerged if demand warranted it. A more achievable alternative might be to pursue some strategy of closure (Ball 2003) and create a school-within-a-school, demarcated by some attribute (such as laptop ownership or academic excellence) that distinguishes that offering for those eligible or able to afford it. Again the capacity of a small population base to sustain such an enclave is questionable. Teachers could be paid substantially more to work in rural and remote locations, to make these postings attractive and increase their 'pull'. These market tactics amount to 'game-keeping' strategies (Urry 2000, p. 5) designed to attract and retain the mobile target population. Our discomfort with such market tactics lies in the inequity of such efforts, and their failure to value-add rural/remote schooling for all. They address self-interest, and fail to dignify professional service for the public good.

Our second hypothetical solution would seek to reverse the neoliberal neglect of public sector institutions. It would re-energise these communities by reinvesting in their schools and health services to guarantee equitable services so small populations do not have to compete from their limited population base. It would replace the neoliberal onus on individual responsibility with a collective responsibility to assure equitable services. This solution would imbue new and existing teachers with a reinvigorated ethic of professional

service, whereby working in small communities becomes a source of professional pride and satisfaction. It would build stronger networks between regional, rural, remote and urban schools so the affordances of each environment could be shared.

The more realistic answer will lie somewhere between, and depend on political will. In the interim, we are left with the conundrum that rural and remote schools need to be of a quality that can attract and retain the professionals needed to staff them, and 'declining communities frequently face a policy environment that views developing their services as a poor investment' (Larson 2010, p. 309). Marketisation policy discourse has raised the stakes and anxieties around perceptions and reputations of 'quality'. Teachers as parents are as vulnerable to these pressures as others. Using a more sociological lens dignifying teachers' whole lifeworld might better inform the conversation around rural/ remote workforce issues.

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Table 1. Overview of participants.

Pseudonym	Gender (M/F)	Age	Number of children	Location type	Tenure at current location	Sector of current employment	Sector of choice for children	
							Primary	Secondary
Alex	M	38	3	rural	2 years	government	Independent → government	government
Anna	F	45	2	regional	17 years	government	independent	independent
Gabrielle	F	42	3	rural	15 years	government	government	government
Helen	F	36	4	rural	2 years	government	government → Catholic → government	government
Imogen	F	32	2	rural	< 1 year	government	Catholic	undecided
Michael	M	34	4	regional	2 years	government	government	government, but will move into catchment zone for choice
Nancy	F	43	2	remote	17 years	government	Catholic	government, considering relocating to larger centre
Olivia	F	42	1	remote	< 1 year	government	government	government , considering relocating to larger centre
Suzanna	F	41	3	regional	10 years	government	government	independent
Wendy	F	46	4	remote	22 years	Catholic (contracts)	Catholic	urban independent boarding school
Yvonne	F	39	3	remote	4 years	government	government	government → urban independent boarding school